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# Contemplative Education: How Contemplative Practices Can Support and Improve Education

Judith Johannes

*University of Massachusetts Amherst*

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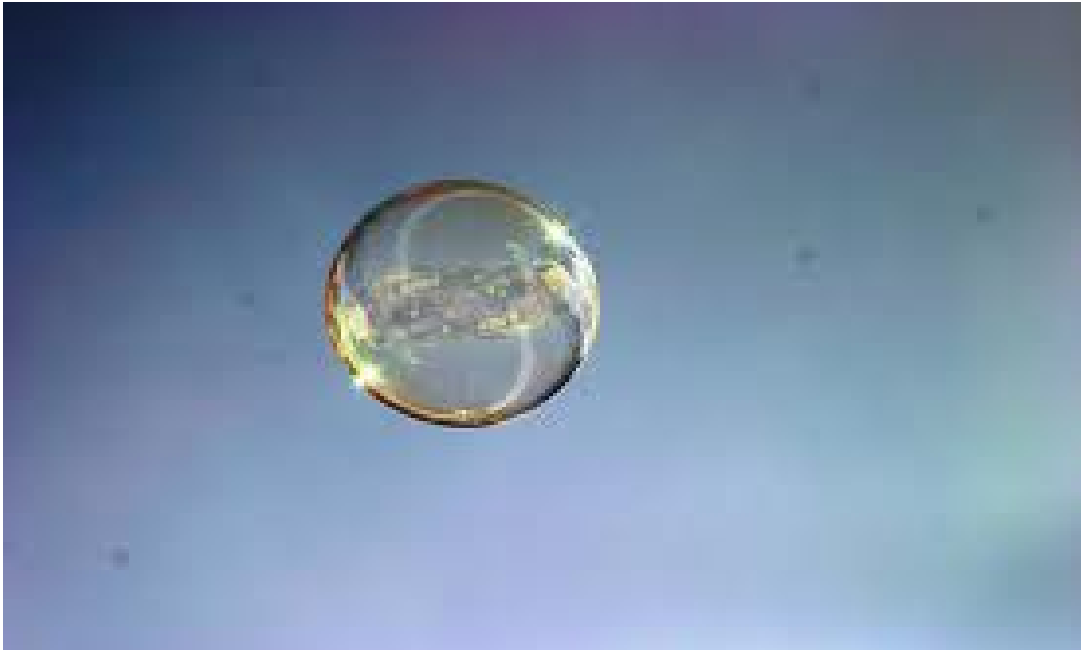
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# Contemplative Education

How contemplative practices can support and improve education



Judith Johannes  
Master Thesis

Center for International Education - University of Massachusetts

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## **Introduction**

The purpose of this study is to explore how contemplative education can have a viable role in education. In the first part of this thesis I will share my own personal experience with contemplative practices and how they led to my personal growth and transformation.

The second part will give some brief insights about the benefits the ancient wisdom traditions Hinduism and Buddhism attributed to contemplative practices. They claim that those practices help to reach a state of expanded awareness and stillness of the mind. Contemplative practices such as mindfulness, which is a Buddhist meditation technique, were used to better understand and train the mind. In those ancient traditions it was believed that contemplative practices could enhance the attention and expand the awareness, and cultivate kindness, empathy and altruism. Those practices were therefore used intentionally for personal growth and social transformation.

The study of the use of contemplative practices in medicine and psychology will be discussed in the third part of thesis. The practice of mindfulness is currently used in mental health to help patients suffering from anxiety, depression, personality disorders, insomnia, eating disorders, post-traumatic stress disorder and attention deficit disorders. It is also successfully used with cancer patients to reduce their physical pain. There is a significant body of research on the effects of meditation on our brain and behavior.

Demonstrated benefits of contemplative practices include stress reduction, enhanced attention and awareness abilities, improved self-regulation and enhanced empathy awareness. The expansion of the body of research on contemplative practices lead to an increased interest in those practices by the education systems. All those benefits of those practices for learning and character development will be investigated in the fourth part of the thesis.

The fifth part will explore the benefits of the use of contemplative practices for teachers and their potential to generate a good classroom climate.

The sixth and last part of the thesis will discuss how contemplative practices can be applied to international education, in developing countries and, more specifically, in emergency education.

## **I. My personal experience with contemplative practices**

I became interested in contemplation practices in 1997 when I was introduced to meditation. It was through two friends of mine that I was recommended to attend a workshop on breathing techniques. I was told that these were very powerful techniques to reduce stress and increase wellbeing and bring high level of energy. I hence applied to the course, which was organized in France. During the course I was taught some Vedic philosophy knowledge points which aimed at better understanding the mind and a set of very powerful yoga breathing techniques. I learned then that the state of profound happiness and deep restfulness I experienced after the breathing exercise was a state of *Samadhi*, which according to Vedic philosophy is a deep level of meditation in which the mind becomes still.

What is mediation? The simplest explanation would be that it is mental exercising which silences the chatter of one's thoughts and brings rest to one's mind. Our mind is continuously active whether we are awake, sleeping or dreaming. Meditation is a practice, which slows down our mental activity and increases our level of awareness. During meditation thoughts are still coming into the mind, but the distance between two thoughts seem to become longer and the meditator also becomes aware when the thoughts are coming and going. In the meditation course the teacher said that in meditation one can experience a far deeper rest than during sleep and that 20 minutes of meditation would be equal to two hours of sleep.

After the course I started to practice the breathing techniques and five to ten minutes of meditation daily. In the beginning I felt uncomfortable and strange to sit still with closed eyes focusing on my breath. After two weeks I started to notice a reduced level of stress and changes in my sleep patterns. I used to struggle with insomnia, and started to have a much deeper sleep. I would not say that my sleeping problems disappeared with the breathing and the meditation, but they became less frequent and less bothering. Since then, when I have nights during which I cannot sleep, I manage to accept the situation, knowing that I can get some rest through meditation, which will help me to go through the next day.

After my initial resistance, my interest in meditation increased slowly but steadily and I started to attend once or twice a year meditation retreats in India and Europe during which I stayed several days in silence, meditating and contemplating. During these retreats I experienced for the first time a deep connection to my inner self, something opened up, this sense of inner connectedness evolved into an experience of dissolution of the self and an increased awareness of the interconnectedness upon others and the environment. This state was accompanied by a sensation of full happiness. Experienced meditation practitioners know that sense of total interconnectedness. It is not a permanent state, it comes and goes, and I fully experience it only in moments of very deep meditation. But even during my short daily practices I get a glimpse of it and it resources me for the day. The longer I practiced the stronger the sense of interconnectedness became.

When I was posted for my work in the Middle East, my daily meditation practices helped me greatly to keep my inner peace in the middle of this troubled region, to keep my spirits high and to maintain my ability to tune into other people and to feel with them, but also to regain my centeredness when I was emotionally overwhelmed by their trauma and distress. I saw many of my colleagues and professional counterparts who arrived to the region after me becoming gradually

affected by negative emotions such as fear, anger, distrust and hatred and then becoming burnt out. Somehow I remained better protected from this kind of negative thoughts and emotions and I believe that it was thanks to the inner calmness and expanded awareness I experienced through my meditative practices. They helped me to keep an emotional balance, an open mind and empathy. I would actually say they contributed to open my heart.

I came to believe through my personal experience that meditation and contemplative practices could reduce stress, transform negative emotions and increase wellbeing and happiness in people. I was not familiar with any researches in this field until I came to follow a master program at the Center of International Education at the University of Massachusetts and was introduced by one of my professors to the new emerging field of contemplative sciences. I was excited to learn that research in medicine, psychology and education supports what millenary-old Hindu and Buddhist knowledge claimed, that contemplative practices can increase health, wellbeing, pro-social behavior and learning. I then decided to dedicate my master thesis to the field of contemplative education.

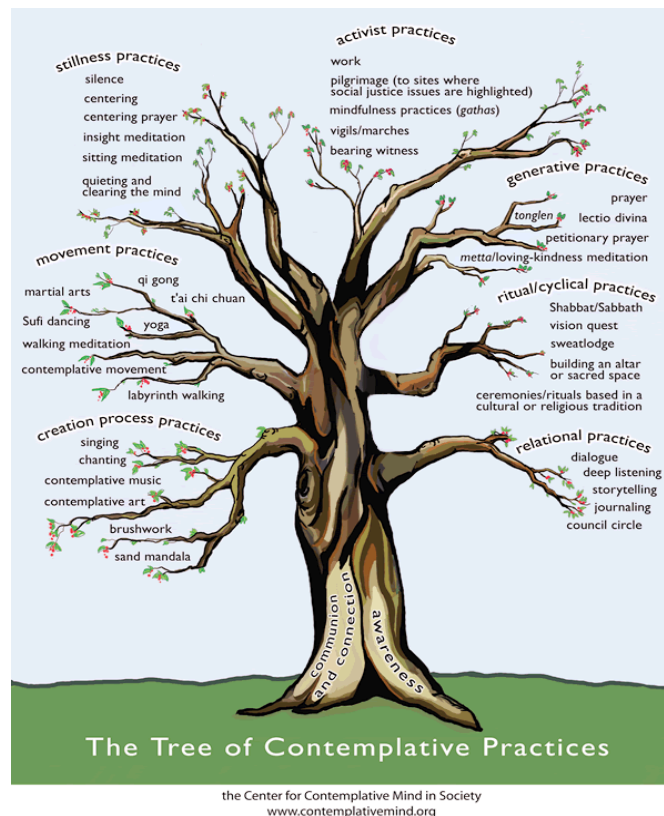
## **II. The practice of contemplation by faith traditions**

There is a long history of the cultivation of contemplation in the main wisdom traditions. Hindu, Buddhist, Christian and Muslim practiced contemplation in a variety of forms. According to Tobin Hart contemplative practices in all those faith traditions have a common goal to interrupt thought patterns and to expand the awareness. Contemplative practices are quieting the mind, and are enhancing one's abilities of attention and insight (Hart, 2004, p. 29). Insight can be described as way of knowing through direct apprehension instead of through intellectual reasoning (Zajonc, 2006, p. 1748)

Hindu and Buddhist wisdom traditions have been investigating for thousands of years how contemplative practices can transform a person's mind, thoughts, emotions and behavior. They claim that regular contemplative practice such as meditation and Yoga can increase awareness, can improve attention and promote ethical development. The aim of the development of contemplative practices by those ancient traditions was to achieve personal growth and social change (Roeser & Peck, 2009)

According to the Contemplative Mind in Society contemplative practices have their roots in two intentions, “cultivating awareness and developing a stronger connection to the divine or inner wisdom (Contemplative Mind in Society, 2011). The Contemplative Mind and Society organizes contemplative practices in seven categories: stillness, activity, movement, rituals, creativity, relations and generative practices.

Figure 1 The tree of contemplative practices





Contemplative practices such as the singing of Hindu Badjan's, the creation of Mandalas, Sufi dances, Zen gardening, yoga, and contemplative prayers and meditation are examples of how faith traditions are exercising contemplation. This tree of contemplative practices is not an exhaustive enumeration of contemplative practices, but for my thesis, which is concentrating on contemplative education it suits its purpose well.

### **III. The use of contemplative practices to improve physical and mental wellbeing**

There is an increasing interest among the scientific community to investigate how practices derived from contemplative traditions can affect a person's mind and physical health. And a growing body of evidence provides scientific underpinning that regular practices of meditation affect a person's body, brain and mind. Areas investigated by scientists are the effects of meditation on the temperature of the body temperature, the immune system, physical pain, attention, awareness, self-regulation, compassion, happiness as well as on mental health.

#### Mindfulness

One of the most studied contemplative technique is *mindfulness*. Mindfulness is an ancient Buddhist meditation technique that is used to train the mind. It is a form of mental training to improve one's skills to raise the level of awareness and to intentionally direct attention. Jon Kabat Zinn who was the first to bring mindfulness into medicine in 1979, defines it as "awareness that emerges through paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, and without judgment, to the unfolding of experience moment by moment" (Kabat-Zinn, 2003, p. 154)

An example of a mindfulness experience in everyday life is when we enter a bathtub filled with warm water. Our mind is fully focused on the sensations of the body gliding into the heat,

feeling the texture of the water on our skin, breathing the humidity in the air, smelling the scent of soaps and shampoos and feeling deep relaxation and wellbeing. This state of full awareness of our gestures, sensations of the body and feelings, in the present moment, could be described as a state of mindfulness.

Another concept that is attributed to mindfulness is the concept of non-judgment. Judgment whether something is good or bad, pleasant or unpleasant, desirable or not, distracts the mind from the experience itself and reduces one's openness to the experience. To be able to fully embrace and apprehend an experience with all the sensations it generates, it is important to temporarily interrupt our judgment.

In contrast to the state of mindfulness there is also a state of *mindlessness*. Mindlessness can be described as the relative absence of mindfulness (Brown and Ryan, 2003 as cited by Schonert-Reichel&Lawlor, 2010). It is a state of reduced awareness because of distraction, ruminating thoughts or simply be generated through an involvement in multiple tasks. Both concepts of mindfulness and mindlessness are relevant for education and learning.

The practice of mindfulness techniques is increasingly used in the fields of medicine and psychology. Jon Kabat-Zinn developed in 1979, while working at the University of Massachusetts Medical School, the Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) program. MBSR was initially developed for patients suffering from chronic physical pain and who did not react to traditional drugs. MBSR became increasingly used for cancer patients. Eventually it was used for people whose high level of stress created mental health problems such as anxiety and depression.

The MBSR program is based on Buddhist mindfulness meditation techniques, which have been de-contextualized and secularized. The theoretical framework of MBSR is that the cultivation of mindfulness helps people to build resilience to better meet the challenges of life. MBSR is a 8-week experiential learning program during which participants meet once a week in group sessions

and practice individual meditation sessions at home. It is an experiential learning program in which the participants learn to identify and manage their inner resources and strengths to bring health, balance and inner calm into their daily life.

MBSR is supported by a significant body of research; it has been successfully used to reduce stress and to help people who suffer from anxiety (Jennings, Draft, 2011) and is used in more than 200 medical centres to treat cancer patients, patients with chronic pain or cardiovascular diseases. (Lantieri, Sept. 2008).

The other dominant mindfulness-based therapeutic approach is Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT) which was developed in 1995 by the mental health practitioners Zindel Segal, Mark Williams and John Teasdale, and which is based on Jon Kabat-Zinn's MBSR program.

MBCT was developed as a cognitive behavioral method of therapy for people with recurrent depressions. MBSR is frequently used for people who are skeptical of or resistant to Cognitive Therapy (CT) (Dobson, 2010). Whereas CT aims at changing the cognitive content by changing the thoughts of the patients, MBCT is a way of changing the relationship people have with their thoughts. It helps people to reduce rumination and prevents them to be consumed by negative thoughts.

MBCT is growing in popularity as it has proved to work successfully for people who are chronically depressed by cutting the rate of relapse into half (Williams, 2010). MBCT is now also used for anxiety, schizophrenia, insomnia and eating disorders. (Williams, 2010).

Both therapeutic approaches, MBSR and MBCT use mindfulness meditation as a form of mental exercise. Mindfulness meditation uses the focus on the breath to raise awareness about thoughts. The aim is to make the person aware that thoughts are not the reality, that they come and go and often contribute to a distorted perception of reality. The mindfulness meditation practitioner

observes the negative thoughts without judgment, stays with them for a while and then discovers that the thoughts dissolve. The idea behind that technique is, that through observation and awareness negative thoughts will disappear. THEY JUST GO, “....like clouds that flow away and then the sun comes out, though the sun was there all the time” (Williams, 2010).

Jon Kabat-Zinn explains that process with the following words: “Touching a thought with awareness is like touching a soap bubble with your finger. It self-liberates and goes ‘puff’ ” (Kabat-Zinn, 2008).

Mindfulness meditation is helping people stay aware and awake and to notice early symptoms of stress, anxiety and psychological disorders. Dan Siegel, a clinical professor of psychiatry at the UCLA School of Medicine who uses mindfulness awareness practices with his patients, argues that only a few minutes of regular practices of mindfulness can have a significant impact on a person’s wellbeing, clarity of mind, feeling of safety and security and can reduce the level of anxiety (Siegel, p. 92, 2011).

It should be noted that professionals using mindfulness in their therapeutic practice need to have a full understanding of that technique by experiencing it themselves. For that reason MBSR and MBCT both request from their therapists and trainers to engage in daily mindfulness meditation practice themselves and to participate regularly in silence meditation retreats. (Burke, 2010)

Through interventions such as MBSR and MBCT mindfulness-based techniques could be examined and valorized in secular contexts. It is now recognized that mindfulness can help people to increase their health and wellbeing. In a secular context mindfulness can be described as a form of mind training – “a form of brain hygiene” (Siegel, p. 83, 2010).

Mindfulness-based practices are among the most commonly used contemplative practices in Education. One of the reasons for that might be that MBSR and MBCT contributed to have

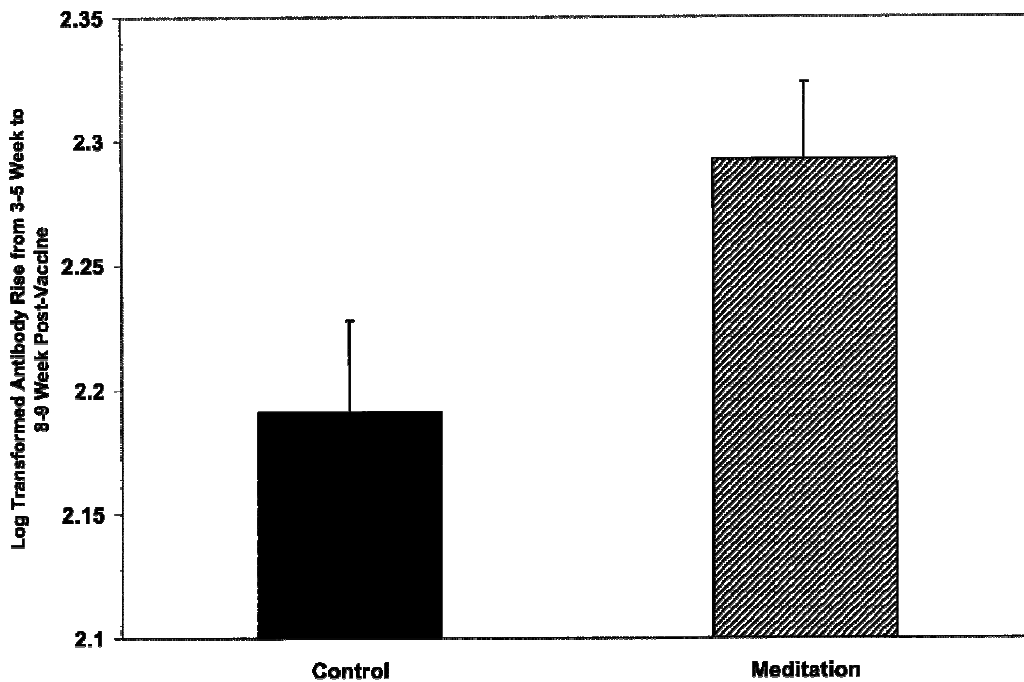
mindfulness be accepted as a secular technique. Though there is a broad body of research on how mindfulness-based approaches can promote health and wellbeing on adult populations, research undertaken on children and adolescents still is in its infancy (Burke, 2010). This is something which would need to be taken into account when considering the use of mindfulness-based techniques with children.

### Studies on the effects of Meditation

The form of contemplation which has been mostly studied is meditation. The scientific community is examining the effects of meditation on the body and the mind since the 50s (Lutz, Dunne & Davidson et al, 2006, p. 497). More than 800 studies have been done so far and most of them were done on adult populations (Black et al., 2009, p. 534).

In 2003 a group of scientists studied the effects of meditation on the immune system. Through a clinical study they wanted to find out whether mental training could improve immune response. A group of randomly assigned individuals participated in a 8-week program that used mindfulness-based meditation practices. The participants from that group showed significantly higher anti-body response to a vaccine than the control group (Davidson, Kabat-Zinn, Schumacher, Rosenkrantz, Muller, Santorelli, Urbanoswsi, Harrington, Bonus& Sheridan, 2003, p. 568).

Figure 2 Anti-body response to a vaccine after meditation practice



Scientists from the University of Wisconsin Madison studied the neuro-physiological process of meditation on the brain and found out that longterm meditation practitioners showed less activity than novice practitioners in a part of the brain called amygdala (Lutz, Slagter, Dunne & Davidson, 2008, p. 165). The amygdala is the part of the human limbic system, which creates automatic reflexive responses such as fighting, flighting or freezing in situations of threats. Those automatic reflexive responses are supposed to protect the human species from life threatening situations. The amygdala is activated by stress, independently whether it comes from a life-threatening situation or just from common challenging situations we experience in daily life. One of the side effects of an activated amygdala is that it prevents information to reach the pre-frontal

cortex, the part of the brain responsible for our executive functions. Under stress the amygdala is effectively blocking one's higher-level thinking and judgment.

Meditation is a powerful mental exercise that can be effectively used to reduce stress and thereby heal stress-related health problems (Benson, Youtube, n.d.). In several clinical studies it was found out that meditation could change the level of the stress hormone cortisol (Lutz et al., 2008, p. 168).

Another finding of the study on meditation was that long-term practitioners have a heightened awareness to notice when their mind is wandering (Lutz et al., 2008, p. 165). Both, neuro-scientific and behavioral studies suggest that the practice of meditation can enhance attention and awareness (Lutz, 2008).

A recent study by scientists from the Massachusetts General Hospital and Harvard Medical School suggests that the practice of meditation can change the structure of the brain by enhancing the density of the hippocampus, the part of the brain which is relevant for learning, memory, self-awareness, compassion and introspection (Harvard Gazette, 2011).

Another area of study, which is investigated by the scientific community, is the effect of contemplative practices on a person's ability of self-regulation. There evidence that practitioner of meditation improves self-regulating skills. (Jennings, 2011, p.4).

Other effects of meditation which have been investigated are relaxation, improved sleep, enhanced wellbeing and positive emotions, and a more trust toward oneself and others (Roeser & Peck, 2009) (Mendelson, Greenberg, Dariotis, Gould, Rhoades&Leaf, 2009).

Finally, studies examining psychological and behavioral outcomes of youth who were practicing meditation suggest that those practices lead to an improved social behavior demonstrated by less school absenteeism and rule infractions, and an improved self-esteem (Black, Milam&Sussman, 2009, p. 538)

Stress, attention, awareness, memory, self-regulation, the generation of positive emotions and pro-social behavior are all aspects which affect learning and character development and which can hence be considered as relevant for education. In the next chapter I will discuss how the use of contemplative practices can be used in education to improve learning and to positively influence character development.

#### **IV. Contemplative practices in education**

The contemporary education system attributes two responsibilities to education institutions: the cognitive development of the students and their character development. The cognitive development is the most valorized responsibility and it places great emphasis on critical thinking and analytical skills. The character development approach has since the 90s focused on the role of education institutions to train students in social and emotional competences. This resulted in the development of social and emotional learning programs for children and adolescents.

An emerging field in education research is contemplative education. Therapeutic practices such as MBSR and MBCT and the research examining the biological, cognitive and behavioral outcomes of contemplative practices have greatly contributed to secularize them. The de-contextualization of contemplative practices from their spiritual tradition and their secularization made it possible to consider meditation, yoga and mindfulness for Western education systems.

There is a variety of definitions that can be found for contemplative education. I include here three of them which combined give in my view a comprehensive picture about what contemplative education might be.

According to Tobin Hart, Professor of Psychology at the University of West Georgia, contemplative education integrates rational, sensory and reflective ways of knowing (Hart, 2004).

The Garrison Institute gives the following definition to contemplative education:



Contemplative education fosters not only personal awareness and inner qualities (such as attention, awareness, self-regulation, the capacity for reflection), but also prosocial values (empathy, compassion) and a sense of connection between the self and the world (the ability to transcend narrow self-interest, the capacity to act appropriately). (Garrison Institute newsletter spring, 2011)

The University of Naropa in Boulder, Colorado defines contemplative education as

“learning infused with the experience of awareness, insight and compassion for oneself and others, honed through the practice of sitting meditation and other contemplative disciplines.”

Contemporary education favors a rational-empiric approach and has only little interest in contemplative practices, which favor reflection, silence and aim at acquiring wisdom and understanding of the deeper meaning of life. Though contemplative education programs are increasingly developed to be implemented in private schools, contemplative practices struggle so far to find a place in public school curricula.

I intend to explain what benefits contemplative practices could bring to education and why they could be considered as not only complementary to contemporary education but also as supportive.

Contemplation can be perceived as “another way of knowing” (Jennings, 2008). It allows a person to connect to his inner wisdom and to bring awareness and insight. In addition to its very unique third way of knowing it also supports the rational-empiric education approach and the development of a person’s character. Scientific evidence from biological, neuro-scientific, developmental and behavioral studies has shown that contemplative practices affect a person’s ability of attention, awareness and self-regulation and are effective for stress reduction. Stress levels, attention, awareness and self-regulation are key elements for effective learning and hence crucial for the cognitive development of a person. Contemplative education is also said to bring a deeper level of learning and understanding.

As regards the development of the character of a person, there are theories that contemplative practices could support the development of social and emotional skills, empathy and compassion. Research is already beginning to support that mindfulness practices can support emotional regulation. (Jennings & Greenberg)

Athur Zajonc, the founder of Contemplative Mind and Society, would define contemplative education as a transformative form of education “that sharpens the intellect and cultivates the hearts” (Zajonc, 2006, p. 1744)

#### **IV.1. Stress reduction**

A person is stressed when she feels that she does not have the resources available to meet the demands. When a person is facing a demanding situation she assesses whether she has the resources to meet the demands. When the person thinks that she does not have the competences to do so, she chooses coping mechanisms to deal with the stress.

Stress is negative for the body and mind. It can cause high blood pressure, cardiac irregularities and can affect mental health and development, and increases the vulnerability to diseases. (Benson, Youtube) (Diamond, 2007). When a person is stressed she produces the hormone cortisol, which puts the metabolism on high alert. If a person is facing regularly stress situations that are overwhelming and which he cannot cope, she will secrete a chronically high level of cortisol. Sustained high level of cortisol can cause brain atrophies and does thus interfere with proper brain development. (Siegel, 2010) (Diamond, 2007). For this reason continuous high level of stress level can be very damaging for the development of children.

High level of stress prevents learning. We have seen in the chapter that discusses research on meditation that stress is activating the amygdala and that this blocks the access for information to the pre-frontal cortex, the part of the brain, which is responsible for learning, attention, and

access to memory (Lantieri, 2009). When a child is stressed it cannot fully use the pre-frontal cortex and this affects its creativity, analytical skills and decision-making skills. Stress also influences how we learn, as new content cannot be fully consolidated in a high stress environment. Research suggests that a low stress environment is necessary for optimal learning and reasoning (Roeser&Peck, 2009, p.129).

Stress can also affect mental health and wellbeing of a person. Rumination and intrusive thoughts are involuntary stress responses that can both lead to anxiety and depression (Mendelson et al, 2009)

Children and adolescents encounter a range of stressors every day in their life: school grades, testing and homework, pressure and gossip from their peers, the fear of bullying and conflict at home with the family. A survey carried out among 875 children from 9 to 13 years old found out that children essentially cope with stress by involving themselves in activities, listening to music or watching television or playing video games (Lantieri, 2008).

It is interesting to note that children do not seem to use techniques to calm themselves down when confronted with stress. The activities they are using can be defined as ways to bypass stress rather than to deal with it directly. The question one can ask is whether children do actually know how to handle stress by calming down their bodies and minds? The answer is most likely No. We tend to ask children to calm down when they are over-excited or anxious, but we do not teach them how to do it.

Contemplative practices such as yoga, mindfulness, deep breathing or meditation are techniques that calm the mind and body, and can therefore bring relief in stress situations. When applying this kind of techniques a child first has to be aware that it is stressed and then to feel the need to manage the stress and to calm down. By doing so this child would deal with the stress

directly. Teaching children and adolescents contemplative techniques to find an inner calm will help them to better deal with stressful situations and will make them more resilient to stress.

We saw that children do not naturally use techniques to cool off when they are confronted with stress and become over-excited or anxious. They need some form of direction, need to be taught techniques, such as mindful breathing for example, to relax and find their inner calm.

In the same way, children are also not taught how to pay attention. They are constantly reminded to pay attention in class, during extra-curricular activities or at home, but rarely are they explained how to focus, how to bring their attention back to a specific object when their mind starts to wander. In the following chapter we will see how contemplative practices can provide practical guidance on how to pay attention and to enhance awareness about attention.

## **IV.2 Enhanced attention and awareness**

There is common understanding that better attention in the classroom leads to better learning. Improved attention defined as an enhanced intensity and stability of one's focus is one of the key aspects of contemplative practices in Yogic and Buddhist traditions. Stability refers to the ability to maintain focus on an object without interruption over a certain period of time. Attention is considered as a trainable skill, which improves with practice. In both Yogic and Buddhist traditions it is believed that there is a link between the fluctuation of the breath and the pattern of the mind. The breath is used to gain control over the mind and to enhance the concentration

The scientific community has carefully examined the effects of contemplative practices on the level of attention of adult populations. And there is evidence that yoga, mindfulness training and meditation improve the level of awareness and the quality of attention. (Mendelson et al., 2009). People who practice mindfulness meditation show a significant improvement of being attentive and not to have their minds somewhere else.

Contemplative practices contribute to develop a capacity of concentration. Yoga trains one-pointed focused attention on specific postures, on specific parts of the bodies or on the breath. Tai-Chi trains similar attention skills. Mindfulness meditation also uses the focus on the breath to enhance the concentration ability. It is now broadly recognized that attention is a trainable skill, which improves with regular practices. Focus on the breath, on a posture or a specific part of the body does not only improve the attention and awareness skills, it also has a calming effect on the mind and brings relaxation to the body.

Mindfulness techniques also bring awareness when the mind starts to wander. Practitioners of mindfulness learn to recognize when their mind is drifting away and to bring it back to the object of attention. Research undertaken on meditation practitioners brought evidence that longterm practitioners have the ability to recognize earlier when their mind is wandering than novice practitioners (Lutz et al., 2008). Mindfulness practices that enhance awareness can also lead to less reactivity as the time laps between the appearance of a thought and emotion and the response is extended. This gives the person more space for conscious choice on how to respond to a situation (Roeser & Peck, 2009). A lower level of reactivity to external stimulations can be helpful in situation where focused attention is required.

Mindfulness practices are now also used to treat people who suffer from attention deficits disorders. A study on attention from the UCLA Mindful Awareness Research Center found out, that mindfulness training improved concentration skills of adults and adolescents who had trouble paying attention. (Siegel, 2011, p. 84).

The capacity to intensely paying attention, to be able to retain the attention for a certain period of time, to notice when the mind starts to wander and to have the ability to redirect the attention, are very useful skills for better and deeper learning.

The importance to cultivate attention skills in students and the difficulty to do so was recognized by the psychologist William James more than 100 years ago. He so truly stated:

“The faculty of voluntarily bringing back a wandering attention, over and over again, is the very root of judgment, character, and will... An education which should improve this faculty would be the education par excellence. But it is easier to define this ideal than to give practical directions for bringing it about.” (William James, 1890)

Contemplative practices for mind training could be a solution to the difficulty to pay attention so many students experience in school.

In recent years research about effective learning has given considerable weight to the *time on task* for students during class. Time on task is the time when a student is engaged in a specific learning activity. This definition assumes that an engaged student is necessarily fully focussed on what he or she is doing. A recent study from Harvard University found out that 46.9% of our time is spent in mind wandering (Killingsworth & Gilbert, 2010, p. 932). Half of our day we do not pay attention to what we are doing. This actually shows a rather low level of attention skills. Time on task informs about the time of active engagement of a student on a learning activity, but it does not inform on the quality of attention the student is giving to the task. The student might well seem fully absorbed in a task but is in reality with his mind somewhere else. Students who receive training in attention skills through mindfulness techniques will have a higher quality of attention and better monitoring skills to notice when their mind is drifting away. Adding the quality of attention on the agenda of effective learning seems therefore reasonable.

Being able to monitor attention and thoughts, and able to direct them intentionally is part of our self-regulation capacity. In the next chapter I will discuss how self-regulation, which is also crucial for learning, can be supported with contemplative practices.

### **IV.3 Improved self-regulation**

Self-regulation is the ability to manage our attention and emotions. Self-regulation skills imply a high level of awareness and good observation skills. Self-regulation of attention requires that a person is able to notice whether her attention is focused and when her mind starts to wander. Another aspect of self-regulation is the ability to inhibit the desire for distraction.

Emotional self-regulation consists of being more aware and better able to understand and manage our emotions. This requires an intelligence of our emotional life. Dan Goleman developed the theory of Emotional Intelligence, in which he argues that emotional intelligence is crucial for the healthy development of a child and for success in life (Goleman, 1995). Goleman's work has also made us understand that EQ is a basic requirement for the effective use of IQ (cognitive skills and knowledge) (Lantieri, 2008)

Emotional self-regulation implies good observation skills, a high level of self-awareness and the ability to handle difficult emotions. In order to be able to manage emotions a person needs to be aware when emotions are arising, understand the nature of the emotions and be aware when they are disappearing. High awareness of emotions leads to less reactivity. A person who is able to notice an emotion at a very early stage of its manifestation has more time to choose how to respond and becomes less subject to automatic reactions. The research on self-regulation is also linked to the study of stress and notably the study of involuntary reactions to stressor. Strong self-regulating skills seem to be essential for better managing and hence becoming more resilient to stress.

Emotional self-regulation seems to be critical for learning as strong emotions cause a narrowed attention. We tend to remember only what fits an emotion in a particular moment and have hence not full access to everything we know. This not only causes a distorted perception and view of reality, but also narrows our choice of responses. (Ekman, Dalia Lama, 2008). Another negative effect of emotions on learning is that strong emotions that cause emotional stress can

inhibit performance of students by paralyzing them during writing efforts or during tests (Hart, 2004).

There is increasing evidence that self-regulation, whether it is used to regulate attention or emotions, is crucial for the success in school (Schonert Reichl & Lawler, 2010).

The regulation of emotions and attention happen in the brain's pre-frontal cortex. Neuro-scientific research on the brain's executive functions show that this part of the brain is malleable. This suggests that self-regulating skills are trainable skills (Mind & Life, 2009)

Behavioural problems among children are often linked to a lack of self-regulating skills. (Jennings draft 2011, p.7).

Contemplative traditions claim that regular practice of mindfulness and meditation supports self-regulation. Some new scientific studies, which investigated the effects of contemplative practices on a person's the ability of self-regulation support that allegation. More research in that area is nevertheless required to fully support this claim with scientific evidence (Jennings, draft, 2011).

Emotional self-regulation and social-interaction are considered key components of Social and Emotional Learning (SEL). The SEL movement, which started with the development of Dan Goleman's theory of Emotional Intelligence, is testing the effects of mindfulness and mediation on the development of social and emotional competences for students and teachers. The idea that regular contemplative practices, which help to calm the mind and bodies, can strengthen social and emotional learning is increasingly supported within the SEL community. SEL programs and contemplative education can be seen as complementary.

It is also suggested that children who learn social and emotional skills are more resistant to stress situations and show less aggressive behavior than children with no social and emotional competences (Schonert\_Reichl, Lawlor, 2010). Linda Lantieri argues that children who are able to



regulate their emotions and to know how to calm down when they are angry or frustrated also seem to better deal with disappointments and distress. Being able to stay focused and motivated even when one experiences a disappointing situation can also contribute to better learning.

Contemplative practices help children to experience calmness and stillness and to connect to their inner balance. They can help to built up an “inner reservoir” that children can tap in difficult and distressful moments (Lantieri in Brock, 2011, p.2).

It moreover seem that there is a relation between the age a child is acquiring self-regulation skills and its ability to deal with difficulties later in life. The earlier a child learns how to calm down when it is emotionally aroused the stronger becomes its brain circuit to handle distress (Lantieri, 2008). Through their impact on self-regulation by calming down body and mind, contemplative practices can be considered as techniques to build up resilience in children.

Finally there also seem to be a relation between self-regulation competence of a person and her ability to feel compassion for another being. Emotional self-regulation in situations of distress seem to be a prerequisite for compassion (Eisenberg as cited by Jennings, Draft 2011, p.6). In the next chapter we will present the idea that contemplative practices can support the cultivation of empathy and compassion.

#### **IV.4. The cultivation of empathy and compassion**

Empathy is the ability to tune into another person and to sense what is going on in that person. Compassion is the desire to help a person when there is need. Compassion can be explained as the concern for others’ needs which is expressed by empathy and pro-social behavior (Knafo, Zahn-Waxler, Van Hulle, Robinson & Rhee 2008).

Contemplative traditions propose that meditation and mindfulness practices, which bring clarity to the mind and help to regulate emotions and a person's reactivity, may cultivate empathy and compassion. Research is beginning to support that idea (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009, p. 511).

Contemplative practices require a certain level of self-reflection and understanding. The enhanced awareness and improved regulation skills that are the results of contemplative practices lead to better understanding and better management of one's own emotions.

It is suggested that the calmness and clarity one reaches through contemplative practices makes one also more aware about the feelings and the wellbeing of others. (Roeser & Peck, 2009, p. 128). It actually seems that a better understanding of our own mind is crucial to be able to understand what is going on in another person (Siegel, 2010, p. 62).

However enhanced empathy does not necessary lead to a compassionate behavior. Research suggests that empathy is a human innate trait, which can be noticed in very young children (Knafo et al., 2008). To translate empathy into prosocial behavior and compassion the empathetic person has to be able to overcome the natural response of distress one sees when recognizing the pain in another person. It is crucial not to be overwhelmed by another's feelings and to be able to make the difference between own or another's person experience. A person who confuses another person's experience with her own experience loses her objectivity and with it her ability to help (Siegel, 2010).

As contemplative practices raise the awareness of our own state of mind and help to regulate our emotions they might also help to prevent this confusion of experiences that might happen when witnessing another person in pain. The clarity of mind one experiences when regularly practicing mindfulness or meditation may help to remain differentiated and to recognize objectively another person's situation, whereas emotional arousal may prevent that (Roeser & Peck, 2009, p. 130).

People who are practicing mediation seem to experience a sense of connectedness with other people. Contemplative faith traditions such as Buddhism and Hinduism believe that lack of empathy and the sense of disconnection from other people are the causes of disharmony, fights and wars between people. They also suggest that the practice of contemplation can promote empathetic relationships, not only with people from the same family, tribe, religions or ethnicity, but with any other living specie in the world. This implies that the use of contemplative practices would contribute to greater peace and harmony in the world (Ekman, 2008).

If we come now back to our topic of education and the intention of the schools not only to develop the cognitive abilities of the students but also their character, the generation of empathy may well be considered as an education goal. The beliefs of certain wisdom traditions that contemplative practices may cultivate a person's empathy and the very first research outcomes that seem to support that claim, could provide another justification for the inclusion of contemplative practices in the school curriculum, as this would contribute to make children become more caring human beings.

## **V. Contemplative practices for teachers**

We have seen that contemplative practices can help to reduce stress, bring a high level of awareness and attention, and there are indications that they can also strengthen self-regulation and develop empathy and compassion. Those attributes could be considered as highly relevant for the teaching profession.

Teachers are exposed to high-level of occupational stress. The results are that more and more teachers are leaving the profession and the number of burnouts is increasing (Jennings&Greenberg, 2008, p. 497). Teachers are often experiencing emotional stress and arousal in the classroom. Teachers do not have the possibility to abandon a classroom when they are emotionally aroused, which offers very little opportunities to them for calming down and

regulating their emotions. It is expected from teachers that they can manage their emotions and stay calm when facing bad behaviour from the children.

Offering techniques such as mindfulness and meditation to teachers, which are very effective to reduce stress and enhance self-regulation skills could be very beneficial for teachers. Those practices could help them to become more resilient to stress and less reactive to emotional arousal. We have also seen that mindfulness and meditation can enhance self-awareness and that a better awareness of one's own emotions is a prerequisite for empathy and to have the ability to understand what is going on in another person. A teacher who has a high level of self-awareness is able to better recognize what is going on in her students, is more empathetic and attuned to the student's inner life which may contribute to better recognize a student's individual learning needs. A teacher who is well attuned to the students can also better detect when a student is losing attention or when he is irritated and ready to act out, and also has more time to decide how to respond in those situations (Jennings, draft, 2011).

High-level awareness, the ability to tune into another person and emotional regulation skills of a teacher seem to be crucial qualities for a good-teacher/student relationship (Jennings, draft 2011). And there is increasing evidence that a good teacher student relationship is crucial for a good classroom climate and for a conducive learning environment (Jennings, draft 2011).

Because of their contribution to stress-reduction, enhanced self-awareness and improved ability to attune to others which leads to a better learning environment, contemplative practices seem to be very suitable for the teaching profession.

Another reason why considering introducing the teaching profession to contemplative practices is that their understanding and experience of the benefits of those practices are crucial for their ability to teach them to the children. We saw in the beginning of this thesis that professionals working with Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) programs are requested to have a

regular personal mindfulness practice and to participate on a regular basis in silent mindfulness meditation retreats. This discipline is considered essential for the proper use of mindfulness for therapeutic purposes. The same logic can be applied to teachers. A teacher who wants to teach mindfulness to children must have experience of mindfulness practices and must somehow have integrated mindfulness into her personal life.

The third reason why contemplative practices such as mindfulness and mediation might be best introduced to teachers first is that almost all research undertaken to assess the effectiveness of those techniques was done on adult populations (Burke, 2010) (Jennings, draft 2011).

## **VI. Relevance of contemplative practices for international education**

We have seen that contemplative practices can teach children how to improve the quality of their attention and the control of their impulses. They can moreover contribute to reduce stress for teachers and students and can help to build a community of empathy and compassion.

The question I would like to discuss in this chapter is whether contemplative practices such as mindfulness are suitable to support educational goals across cultures.

Contemplative and mindfulness education are contributing to better learning and to a better society. Why should not every child in the world get the opportunity to learn tools to be able to improve the quality and the direction of her attention? To get the opportunity to become aware of mind wandering, and to read, understand and manage her emotions? And why should not every student and teacher be able to benefit from techniques to reduce stress? Why should not every community get the opportunity to cultivate empathy and compassion among its members?

But before focusing on other cultures, it should be mentioned that those practices encounter some resistance within the American public education system. Despite the efforts from the health

community to fully secularize mindfulness for therapeutic purpose, it still has kept a Buddhist connotation.

In the framework of my Master program at the Center for International Education at University of Massachusetts Amherst, I carried out a small scale qualitative research study in a private pre-K to K8 school in Upstate New York. The school applies since 2007 the mindfulness education program, *MindUp* (Mindup Curriculum, 2011) which was developed by the Hawn Foundation. During this study I learned that the mindfulness techniques taught and applied in *MindUp* (the core technique is mindful breathing to bring calmness to the mind and bodies of the children) was very well accepted by the children. This high level of acceptability was confirmed by several studies, which investigated the effects of contemplative practices on children and adolescents (Burke, 2010; Brock, 2011; Mendelson et al. 2009; Schonert-Reichl & Lawlor, 2010). In the school, which implemented the MindUp program the resistance was actually coming from some of the teachers and some parents. The main reason for this resistance were the Buddhist roots of mindfulness, and the fact that Goldie Hawn, the founder of the Hawn Foundation, practices Buddhism.

Teachers, with whom I attended in August 2011 in New York the teacher training seminar *CARE for Teachers (Cultivating Awareness and Resilience in Education)*, confirmed that both public school administration and parents were reluctant to consider the introduction of mindfulness into the education of their children. Again, it was the Buddhist roots of mindfulness, which caused their resistance in most cases. Interestingly those fears seem far less present in the mental health practice, where mindfulness is nowadays so commonly used through the Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction program and the Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy.

I believe that one of the reasons why mindfulness became so successful in the medical and psychological practice, is because it is so simple. Novice practitioners are usually introduced to

mindfulness through mindful breathing techniques, which is a focus on the breath accompanied by an awareness of the thoughts and of mind wandering.

Breathing is something universal; everybody does it. And one can easily experience and explain how the breath pattern is linked to the mind, and how the breath can help to control one's thoughts and emotions. The simplicity and the experiential nature of mindfulness are in my view also the reasons why mindfulness is also predominantly used in the US in contemplative education programs. Mindful breathing does not require any preparation in terms of equipment, materials or space, such as contemplative art or dance practices for example. It can be done anywhere, anytime and is also not very time consuming. As described earlier, only a few minutes of regular practices of mindfulness can have a significant impact on a person's clarity of mind (Siegel, 2011, p. 92). One could believe that mindfulness might be predisposed for education systems in more modest environments.

I could not find any studies or publications, which investigate the use of contemplative practices in educational settings in developing countries. From my own experience as a practitioner of meditation and from my experience to work in developing countries, I have identified two areas for which I would like to investigate the potential benefits of contemplative practices in education in developing countries. The first area is the use of contemplative practices to reduce the stress among teachers. The second area is the use of contemplative practices in emergency education.

## **VI.1 Teacher stress in developing countries**

Teachers face a high level of occupational stress. Some research suggests that the level of occupational stress experienced by teachers is higher than in other profession (Jesus and Conboy as cited by Kayuni & Tambulasi, 2007, p. 92).

Teachers all over the world experience occupational stress. Sources of stress are manifold and culture specific. Each culture has culturally specific ways to cope with stressors (IASC, 2007). For example a study carried out among Jewish and Arab teachers suggests that there are cultural differences between the two groups how they cope with stress. The study suggests that Jewish teachers demonstrated a more active coping style with stress than their Palestinian colleagues. (Gaziel, 1993).

However, there are also methods of coping with stress that tend to be helpful across cultures (IASC, 2007). Though it would require more research to assess the cross-cultural effectiveness of mindfulness, I would assume that it could be considered as a stress regulation technique that is helpful across cultures.

Mindfulness originated in Far Eastern cultures, where it was practiced for hundreds of years and is applied successfully 7,500 miles westwards in modern USA, which shows that it can not only be effective across time, but also across continents.

When I looked into studies and academic publications which investigate the level of stress and the nature of stressors of teachers in a number of developing countries, there seems to exist a common source of stress for teachers across the Global South: overcrowded classrooms accompanied by a high level of workload. Other stress factors recurrent in developing countries are the absence of students and absence of teaching materials (Bennell & Akyeampong, 2007).

In Nigeria, other major sources of stress identified among primary teachers are the lack of teaching resources, lack of writing material for students and the student's low motivation to work (Arikewuyo, 2004).

From my own experience of working in the occupied Palestinian territory I know that poor and irregular pay was a major source of stress for teachers between 2006 and 2007, after the election that brought the Hamas government into power and which resulted in a cease of donor



funds for teacher salaries. Other sources of stress I could observe in the Palestinian territory were poor working conditions and weak leadership and administration.

The high level of stress that teachers experience has a negative impact on their health and work performance. Stress can lead to fatigue, sleep deprivation and ultimately to burnout (Gaziel, 1993). Symptoms of stress can be low professional performance, tardiness, absenteeism (Eres&Atanososka, 2011), leaving the teaching profession (Kayuni&Tambulasi, 2007) or to early retirement (Gaziel, 1993).

The sources of stress identified among teachers in developing countries often give the teachers little margin to eliminate them. The teachers in those countries cannot do much to reduce the sizes of their classes and hence reduce their heavy workload. The teachers are also powerless with regard to absence of teaching material for themselves and writing material for the students. The teachers can go on strike if they are not regularly paid or paid too little, but this generally takes some time and requires some form of organization by the unions, which can be a lengthy process. In the meantime the teachers' health can considerably suffer from high level of stress.

Considering that those teachers are often powerless with regard to the sources of stress they are facing, it would certainly be helpful to propose to them techniques, which would help them to better manage their level of stress to be less affected by it. We have seen in the beginning of this thesis, that there is a broad body of research, which suggests that mindfulness and other contemplative practices can reduce stress and hence contribute to better stress management. Those solid scientific evidences could help to promote those techniques in educational settings in developing countries.

The fact that mindfulness is rooted in Far-Eastern traditions could actually be an advantage to gain the interest for those practices in certain non-Western countries. Mindfulness would then

not be considered as a new form of Western pedagogy, waking up old fears of Western imperialism.

Studies in India found out that there are high incidences of cancer and heart diseases among primary and secondary teachers, and teachers also have a high involvement in road accidents (Bakhtiar&Rao&Suneetha, 2004). Another study documents that the occupational stress of teaching increases heart rate and blood pressure (Bakhtiar&Rao&Suneetha, 2004). The high incidents of road accidents could be related to a lack of awareness and attention because of a high level of stress. Better attention and higher awareness might indeed lead to better behavior and faster reactions on the roads and might in the case of the teachers in India contribute to lower incidences of road accidents. Proposing contemplative practices to teachers in India to reduce their levels of stress wouldn't be perceived as a cultural challenge. Indians have a long tradition of Hindu and Buddhist practices, and though many contemporary Indians are not practicing meditation or other forms of contemplative practices, they would certainly know about them.

Before considering introducing contemplative practices into education systems from other cultures, it would be necessary to well understand local norms and practices of those cultures.

The concept of stress, which is of common usage in Western cultures, might not exist in the indigenous knowledge in other cultures. In Rwanda for example, there is no word for "stress" in Kinyarwanda (Summerfield, 1999). Stress might also not have the same importance in non-Western countries as in the West.

Before considering any intervention to introduce techniques to reduce the stress of teachers in a non-Western country, it might be crucial to first find out whether the teachers in that country consider stress as a problem. And only if they ask for interventions to help reducing their level of stress, techniques such as mindfulness can be proposed.

## **VI.2 Contemplative practices for emergency education and psychosocial support**

Emergency education aims to ensure that the children's right to education is maintained during times of natural disasters or armed conflicts. Educational needs of children are often not met during emergencies and crisis situations. Education in emergencies contributes to prepare children to rebuild the society once the crisis is over and to maintain basic skills within the population for economic development. The main focus of emergency education is hence to rebuild society and to meet economical needs (Halstead & Affouneh, 2006). Emergency education also offers a platform to promote understanding, peace and tolerance.

The reconstruction of social structures that have been broken, is considered crucial for the psychological recovery of people affected by conflict, war and natural disaster (IIEP UNESCO, 2006). Psychosocial support establishes the link between social context and psychological well being.

“Psychosocial support recognizes the importance of the social context in addressing the psychological impact of stressful events experienced in emergencies. In practice, this means facilitating the reconstruction of local social structures (family, community groups, schools) which may have been destroyed or weakened by an emergency, so that they can give appropriate and effective support to those suffering severe stress related to their experiences.” (Nicolai, 2003 as cited in IIEP, 2006)

The idea is that through reconstruction of social structures, which have been destroyed by an emergency or a crisis, psychological healing happens.

Emergency education and psychosocial support are closely linked. In emergency situations education can be considered as a crucial psychosocial intervention (IASC, 2007) Emergency education contributes to rebuild destroyed social structures by re-establishing schooling during or

right after emergency (Benselah et al., 2001; Sommers, 2002), providing hence a sense of normality to the people affected by the emergency.

In the present chapter I discuss how contemplative practices can support emergency education and psychosocial support programs.

People affected by natural disasters or living in armed conflict settings tend to suffer from severe stress. We have seen at the beginning of this thesis, that stress negatively impacts the health by enhancing blood pressure, causing cardiovascular problems, increasing the vulnerability to diseases and that it affects mental health. Stress has a huge impact on our brain. It affects cognitive development and prevents the full use of our cognitive abilities. Stress hormones negatively affect one's analytical and decision making abilities and one's creativity. When a person is under a high level of stress she loses the ability to think clearly and to make good decisions.

At the beginning of this thesis, we have seen that there is a broad body of evidence suggesting that contemplative practices can significantly reduce stress. As both students and teachers living in emergency situations are suffering from very high level of stress, techniques such as mindfulness for example, which are easy to understand and to use, could play a useful role in emergency education.

Children in conflict regions or regions affected by natural disaster are experiencing distress, which can lead to concentration problems and restlessness (IIEP UNESCO, 2007). We have also seen that there is significant scientific evidence that contemplative practices can support effective learning by improving the intensity and quality of attention. The weakened concentration and the enhanced restlessness experienced by children in emergency situations might be mitigated with the practice of contemplation. Anxiety is another possible symptom of distress among children of all ages affected by a crisis (IIEP UNESCO, 2007). Mindfulness has been successfully used to reduce

anxiety in patients in the framework of Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction programs or Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy.

In September 2010 UNESCO ordered a study (UNESCO, 2010) for a psychosocial assessment of education after the Israeli military operation Cast Lead. This assessment was part of an emergency support to the education system in Gaza. The study documented the effects of the military operation on learning and teaching. The teachers experienced an increased level of stress. Another outcome of the study was that students and teachers had concentration problems.

A teacher complained that “(Students) cannot concentrate. They are distracted by thoughts of what happened before and fearful of what may happen again – Primary School teachers.” (UNESCO, 2010, p. 43). Students did not only experience problems to pay attention in school but also when they were doing their homework at home. Moreover the students reported problems to memorize what they had learned and an enhanced anxiety during exams (UNESCO, 2010, p. 44).

But of course not only learning was affected by the war. The students also reported anxiety and sadness, which lead to an increase of tranquilizer consumption and addiction (UNESCO, 2010, p. 24). Students were ruminating about what happened and anxious that it might repeat. Increased aggressive behavior among the students was another outcome the teachers reported. Teachers participating in the UNESCO study reported that after the military operations they had to spend time in class to help the students calm down. Many teachers complained that they did not have the skills to calm down their students (UNESCO, 2010, p.39).

Stress, attention deficit, anxiety and depressive feelings are precisely all conditions, which can be successfully addressed with contemplative practices. The effectiveness of contemplative techniques to address those conditions is supported by a significant body of research. New evidence further suggests that mindfulness-based techniques can have a positive impact on

rumination of thoughts and emotional arousal. (Mendelson et al. 2010, p. 985) A practice like mindfulness could therefore seem relevant for an emergency context like the one in Gaza.

We have seen in the previous chapter, that mindfulness has proven a certain degree of transcultural validity, as it could be successfully used in ancient Far-eastern countries and in mental health practices in modern USA. It might also be interesting to remind, that MBCT is appreciated by patients who are resistant to classical forms of therapy (Dobson, 2010). Some mental health patients are reluctant to talk about themselves and have therefore issues with talk therapies, which are so widely used in Western countries. MBCT does not require from the patients to talk about themselves and it seems that for many patients this is an enormous relief (Williams, 2010).

Many cultures are not familiar with talk therapies, which invite the patient to release negative emotions and distress through talks (Summerfield, 2002). Those cultures might feel more comfortable with a form of therapy that works with one's own awareness and attention and does not require sharing of experiences and feelings. Mindfulness is a highly adaptive technique, that can be practiced alone in any place at any time.

Mindfulness is a practice that can enable people “to find stillness in the middle of a frantic world” (William in Gnu Film, 2011). Brining mindfulness into schools in a crisis or emergency situation would allow the students and the teachers who are severely stressed to find within themselves a place of calmness.

Faith traditions such as Buddhism and Hinduism believe that establishing peace in ourselves is essential to foster peace in the world. Ghandi famously recommended to “be the change you want to see in the world”. In the last part of this thesis I am exploring how contemplative practices might be used contribute to appeasement and conflict resolution.

### **VI. 3 Peace and conflict resolution**

From my own experience as a development practitioner working in the war-affected occupied Palestinian territories I could witness how conflict resolution initiatives failed because of a lack of emotional self-regulation skills among the participants. Emotional arousal was incredibly high and could be sparked by a minor contrariety. I also witnessed that people could not clearly think when they were overwhelmed by their emotions, which had a detrimental impact on analysis and decision-making. Development practitioners working in that area were not spared from that phenomenon. They were also subject of high emotional excitement with its negative impact on analysis and decision-making.

I was often thinking that people living in that region would greatly benefit from practicing meditation techniques, which can help to find inner peace and calmness. I had experienced myself for example that a focus on the breath could help to enlarge the gap between my impulse and action. At the time I only could refer to my personal meditation experience. I was not aware of the findings in contemplative sciences of the positive effects of mindfulness on physical and mental wellbeing, and on interpersonal relationships and pro-social behavior.

In the dialogue between Paul Ekman and the Dalia Lama (Ekman, 2008) both have noted that people with a strong emotional balance have a calming effect on other people. The Dalai Lama moreover believes that meditation can transform people that they become more loving and kind. He considers mindfulness and meditation techniques as “loving-kindness weapons” (Ekman, 2008) Loving-kindness in one person seem to have the capacity to soothe and calm the others. Though research starts to support the theory that contemplative practices can enhance empathy and pro-social behavior, their benefits in conflict regions and peace programs still need to be investigated.

The ability of contemplative practices to enhance self-regulation, bring emotional balance, enhance awareness and attuning into others, and cultivate empathy and compassion would make them relevant techniques for conflict resolution and peace programs.

Schools are the ideal environment to promote peace, mutual understanding and tolerance with the help of contemplative practice programs for teachers and students. Schools give access to all children on a daily basis and over a long period of time. Peace programs and the practice of mindfulness require regularity and practice. Contemplative practices which reduce stress, bring emotional balance, inner peace and resilience. These are all attributes, which are very useful for people living in conflict regions.

## **Conclusion**

Contemplative practices seem to have a place in international education, whether it is to support teachers in their coping skills for stress, in a context of emergency education or to promote peace and understanding among people.

From the conferences and seminars on contemplative sciences I attended last year while I stayed in the US I learned that there is a NGO *Mindfulness without Borders*, which is implementing peace and conflict resolution programs in conflict and post-conflict regions in Rwanda, Nigeria and Uganda, with the aim to promote a shared language of peace and compassion. Their program is targeting youth, educators, health care professionals and leadership. Very little is published on their website about the content, objectives and outcomes of the programs. I have no knowledge or opinion about the validity of a 'shared language of peace' but I do believe that a calm mind and inner peace can be valued across countries and cultures.



For further research it would be interesting to investigate the transcultural validity of mindfulness and its effectiveness on students and teachers who are affected by emergency and crisis.

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Figure 1 The tree of contemplative practices

Figure 2 Anti-body response to a vaccine after meditation practice